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ABSTRACT

A review of available research supports the observation that the young child who lives and grows in the midst of dual language opportunities may enjoy benefits of mental flexibility or may suffer burdens of mental confusion. Further research must explore the language-thought relationship, consider the effects of dual language learning on cognitive processes and draw conclusions relevant to objectives and methods in bilingual education during the period of optimum language learning. Central to this question is a consideration of refining the mother tongue even when it is not the dominant language of the community. For those children in dual language settings, parents and teachers should keep the two languages growing in separate contexts so that coordinate language systems may result. They should provide good models and a rich background of environmental encounters. An early childhood bilingual education program will provide experiences to help children understand and relate to their environment and the larger society as well as providing language to enable the child to label, classify and store the experience for later retrieval. As the program continues, it will give due consideration to the best language of instruction in the various subject areas, the teaching of reading and writing, and the distinction between learning concepts and learning the language to express concepts. The challenge lies in guiding learners through the process so they may be competent, knowledgeable and comfortable in two environments and in two languages. (AMH)

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# THE DUAL LANGUAGE PROCESS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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# THE DUAL LANGUAGE PROCESS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Eleanor Thonis

The outstanding intellectual achievement of any child is the acquisition of language. When a child acquires two languages and uses them effectively, the accomplishment is a remarkable triumph in human learning. The young child who lives and grows in the midst of dual language opportunities may enjoy great benefits of mental flexibility or may suffer great burdens of mental confusion. Whether the early exposure to languages other than the mother tongue becomes an asset or a liability is dependent upon a number of highly complex variables. Among these are genetic endowment, parental education, economic status, cultural group, social class, and life opportunities. In addition to these influences, both internal and external, there are other factors--the age at which the second language learning begins, the degree of proficiency in the first language, the quality of the language experiences, the relative political positions of both languages, and the acceptance the speaker experiences in each cultural milieu.

## The Child's First Language

In the natural course of total development, the nor-

mal child acquires a first language, the system of sounds which accompanies experience. As the child encounters the physical and psychological world, information is taken in. The child receives sensory data, images, symbols and sounds, sorts a vast amount of undifferentiated stimuli and begins to attach meanings to them, becoming increasingly aware of objects, people, and events in the immediate environment. These are personal realities which the child encodes in sounds imitative of those who care for him or her. The wonder and the power of words is soon discovered. The child understands what others are saying and can act or choose not to act in response. Others understand and can in turn respond. There are now perceptual constants and conceptual certainties to be shared by means of a mutually-understood symbol system. The child perceives, listens, talks, smiles, feels good personally and about others. The world is a fairly steady, reliable place. The specific symbols used to describe and to explain it are reasonably dependable and unchanging. Real and symbolic boundaries expand consistently with enriched experiences and improved language. Mastery of the first language is commensurate with the child's inner potential and the diverse external conditions.

The Child's Second Language

The young child may begin the second language at precisely the same moment when first language growth gets under way. If parents, grandparents, household members, or others responsible for the infant use a second language, the infant

learns to listen, to speak and to attach meanings to sound systems of more than one speech community. When both languages are available from the start, the child may become very proficient in one language, partially competent in the second, equally poor in both, or any other combination of possibilities ranging across the many dimensions of sounds, structures, vocabulary and semantics of both languages. The variations are unique to the individual child. Should the child have a good start on the first language prior to the second language exposure, there are some previous learnings which may be brought to the new language task. The child already has a background of experiences, sensations, percepts, images, concepts, sounds and symbols, and possesses a storehouse of information about language, what it is made of, and how it works. The child has imitated and internalized the symbol system of the first language. The extent to which this is done depends upon the depth and breadth of the initial language acquisition.

The next step is to learn to attach new sounds and/or different combinations of them to the reservoir of knowledge already stored. The child may also have to undergo new experiences specific to the cultural environment in which the new speech community exists. It is necessary for the child <u>to listen</u> to the second language, <u>to understand</u> which sounds stand for which reality already encountered, to meet new, unfamiliar realities, <u>to remember</u> the order of sound combinations, <u>to imitate</u> accurately the available speech

models and finally, to speak fluently. The degree of success enjoyed in the dual language learning process is determined by the strength of the first language, the existence of interference, the number and kind of experiences, the accompanying feelings and expectancies, and countless other forces which shape human speech. It is difficult to predict whether such a person will be blessed with a second-language accomplishment or burdened with a second-language handicap. Like matrimony, it may be for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, but it is hazardous, at best, to predict the outcome.

Two Languages - Burden or Benefit?

The literature is replete with studies which report the destructive effects of dual language learning on speech production, concept acquisition, vocabulary growth, intellectual power, social adjustment, and personality development. Negative impact on speech includes errors in articulation, voice distortion, faulty rhythm, and inappropriate stress. Inhibition of language maturity is seen in fewer words, shorter sentences, confused word order, grammatical errors and poor idiomatic expression. Slowness in intellectual growth is related to the imprecise use of two languages, inadequately developed to serve as instruments of thought. Educational retardation begins early when the written language tasks of reading, spelling, and handwriting are insufficiently supported by a broad base of oral language abilities. Access to the fields of knowledge by way of the

weaker language results in limited achievement. Personality disorders and character disturbances reportedly accrue from the tension and stresses attendant upon straddling two different cultures, seeing the world from two different points of view and using two different symbol systems to express them. There is certainly no shortage of ordinary perils during the period of childhood. With these gloomy prophecies, the burden of dual language learning is seen as overwhelming.

Dissenting voices, however, state emphatically that the problems attributed to dual language learnings in early childhood have been grossly exaggerated. This more positive view insists that the failure to control significant research variables has led investigators to overstate the severity of speech difficulties, to describe inaccurately language development delays, to distort unrealistically intellectual limitations, to emphasize educational retardation unduly, and to magnify personality disintegration or character disorders without adequate documentation. Many scholars claim advantages of dual language learning both for the individual and for the society. Jensen (1962) has provided an excellent research summary of the effects, both good and bad, of childhood bilingualism. Because increasing contact among different nations and diverse individuals is greater than ever before, adequate communication skills have become prerequisites for survival. It is imperative to examine all the possibilities, good and bad, and to draw conclusions based on more careful research.

Dual Language Learning and Thought

The relationship between a child's acquisition of language and the ability to think is not very clearly understood. Three major positions are to be found among the scholars. Language and thought are identified as the same entity; they are said to be separate entities, or they are considered as somewhat loosely related entities. It is very difficult to observe what happens when children are engaged in thinking, and it is almost impossible to arrive at a universally acceptable definition of thought. Among the several raw materials of thought, however, are symbols, both verbal and non-verbal. Thinking, then, may rely totally upon the quantity and quality of verbal symbols; may depend partially upon these language proficiencies; or may not require specific verbal abilities at all, depending upon the theory of language-thought relationships espoused. If and when children use verbal symbols as an accompaniment of thought, this inner language is usually the mother tongue (Vygotsky, 1962). It is reasonable to assume that the more precise the language used, the clearer the thinking, when other conditions remain the same. Language carries content--ideas, generalizations and relationships concerning the child's reality. When the child's experiences and encounters with the environment are clarified, stored and available for retrieval in precise terms, it would appear the child would have an incisive instrument to use in reasoning, judging, remembering and understanding. There is great need to explore further the language-thought relationship and to consider the effect of

dual language learning on the cognitive processes. Central to this question is a consideration of refining the mother tongue even when it is not the dominant language of the community. If there is found a valid need for inner language, for purely personal purposes in reflecting, musing, and thinking, then the social purpose of using expressive language in communicating must not be the only emphasis in language learning.

The Best of Both Languages

Fishman (1965) has stated that more than half of the world today uses more than one language while engaging in the activities basic to human needs. With rapid technological advances in transportation and communication, the proportion of bilingual endeavors is bound to increase. It is important to consider thoughtfully the education of those children who are presently living and growing in dual language settings. The language variables must be arranged to create a maximum of benefits and a minimum of burdens. There appear to be several known conditions, conducive to promoting success and preventing failure, for children engaged in the acquisition of two or more languages. It would seem that parents and/or teachers should keep the languages growing in separate contexts so that coordinate language systems may result. Coordinate systems appear less subject to interference and confusion (Jensen, 1962b). It is vital to have the best language models available in both languages, as children will readily imitate errors in phonology, intonation and structure.

As language, one or several, grows out of experience, it is essential to provide children with a rich and varied background of environmental encounters so that sensory impressions, images, percepts, and concepts may be tested, verified, and encoded in language. The press for early school achievement in the weaker language should be avoided. Since schools, even on primary levels, demand an extraordinary proficiency in receptive and expressive use of verbal symbols, every effort must be exerted to insure that the children's language competency is commensurate with the school's expectations. When the language of the home is not that of the school nor of the majority culture, extra care must be taken to engender feelings of acceptance and equality. Children's first language learnings take place in the warmth and intimacy of the family. These learnings carry with them memories and emotions which are part of the adult. When the person's language is valued, the person feels valued as well.

Excessive demands for control of the conventions of the writing systems in either the native language or the second one should not be made. Reading and writing skills require responses to a set of visual symbols superimposed upon auditory symbols. It is logical to expect that normal children will read and write first the language which they control well in its oral form. The implications of arranging a program of dual language learning which provides for an appropriate sequence of skill development are self-evident.

Though many of the social, economic, and political

variables affecting the outcomes of dual language learning process are outside the sphere of influence of educators, such factors as acceptance of the child's uniqueness, respect for the native language, appreciation of the cultural heritage and attention to the child's specific language requirements will contribute greatly to a successful acquisition of two or more languages. The world needs speakers of many languages to share new ideas, to exchange technological knowledge, to preserve history and to talk together for peace in the universe. Wherever the dual language talents of young children are found, they must be nurtured and preserved.

Dual Languages in a Curriculum for Young Children

A curriculum that would deliver the valuable benefits of dual language learning, and which, at the same time, would remove its heavy burdens, is presently the subject of considerable discussion in educational circles of the United States. With greater concern for the rights of ethnic minority groups and with improved resources for the creation of special programs, a number of vastly different plans have been implemented.

Though highly diverse in ultimate goals, classroom organization, staffing patterns and teaching strategies, these curricula share the common title of bilingual education. The description which follows gives the basic framework for one approach to the education of young children who are currently using or who are actively learning two languages. There are six major strands which support activities designed

to remove the major stumbling blocks to successful learning. The six primary areas are: (1) expanded experiences with the environment; (2) improved oral language ability in the vernacular; (3) introductory literacy skills in the native language; (4) intensive oral language development in the second language; (5) readiness for literacy in the second language; (6) access to fields of knowledge by way of the stronger language and through the best language modality.

The uniqueness of an early childhood curriculum in which two languages serve as media of instruction provides the opportunity to develop truly bilingual pupils during the period of optimum language learning. For the child whose first language is not English, there is provision for expansion and refinement of the vernacular across all language bands of listening comprehension, speaking fluency, reading, and writing. For the child who is a native speaker of English, there is an introduction to a second language according to a carefully ordered plan which will lead to full competence in these same bands of language. Essential to any successful educational plan is the emphasis upon a deep awareness of the environment in which the pupil is living and growing. The understanding of the immediate world, as well as the larger society to which a child contributes, must come from broad experiences at all levels. Such experiences should be first hand when feasible and practical, or may be offered vicariously through pictures, films, slides, records, tapes, television, and other media. Each experience should

be accompanied by language which enables the learner to label, to classify and to store that experience for later retrieval. It seems reasonable to expect the child's stronger language to serve as the mediator when new experiences are presented, especially when an experience is totally new and serves as a basis for concept acquisition. It is important to distinguish between the learning of the new label for a known concept and the acquisition of a totally new concept derived from a never-before-encountered experience.

Each language activity must be arranged according to the developmental stage and educational background of individual learners. Formal literacy programs in either the vernacular or in the second language must be structured and supported by a broad base of oral language. Print stands for speech; print is secondary to speech; and print must be transformed into the language system which the child controls in its oral form. The dual language curriculum must also take into account the difference between language as a study in itself and language as a carrier of content in all fields of knowledge. It is most unjust to anticipate that a child will master a new language--its phonology, structure, vocabulary, and semantics--in both oral and written form together with the acquisition of the body of knowledge carried by that language.

Pupils should be introduced to basic understandings in mathematics, science, social science, health, and safety through the medium of the stronger language. Pre-literate

and functionally illiterate pupils should be provided with pictures, demonstrations, films, and oral explanations which are comprehensible to them. Textbooks, workbooks, study sheets, and other written materials which cannot be read and understood should be avoided until literacy skills are well established. The curriculum plan must provide for differential proficiencies not only in the two languages, but also within the dimensions of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. At <u>each</u> grade level, in <u>each</u> subject area, and for <u>each</u> learner, the expected performances must be consistent with the enormous complexities of children developing <u>dual</u> languages. Pupils who enter an educational program at different points should be placed where they feel most comfortable socially and chronologically. Prior learnings must be assessed and appropriate skills must be introduced for reinforcement. The goal of excellence does not need to be changed or lowered. Children learning by way of two languages do not require a dilution of the curriculum or a set of different educational goals. They need the same <u>quality</u> educational program as their monolingual peers in a single language curriculum. They do need <u>time</u>, proper sequence of subject matter, appropriate teaching strategies, and careful appraisal of progress as they grow toward this standard of excellence. Children who are <u>learning</u> two languages, as well as <u>using</u> two languages in order to learn, are engaged in a highly complex process, one which influences their cognitive power, their emotional development, and their personality.

The challenge lies in the preparation of an educational plan which will guide them safely through the dual language process so that they are competent, knowledgeable, and comfortable in two environments and in two languages.

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## SUGGESTED READING

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